DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 903 FL 019 376

AUTHOR Yip, Virginia
TITLE Interlanguage Ergative Constructions and Learnability.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 25p.; In: CUHK Papers in Linguistics, No. 2. p45-68, Aug 1990; see FL 019 373.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese; *English (Second Language); *Error Patterns; Foreign Countries; *Interlanguage; Language Patterns; Language Research; Linguistic Theory; Second Language Learning; Uncommonly Taught Languages; *Verbs
IDENTIFIERS *Ergativity; Learnability Theory; *Passive Voice

ABSTRACT

A certain group of English verbs, the ergatives, is consistently mis-passivized in Chinese-speakers' interlanguage. Comparison of the ergative construction in Chinese and English shows that they share similar properties. However, this does not seem to facilitate learning of the target English construction. Furthermore, the passive ergatives are not attributable to exemplification in either the native or the second language, but this distinct type of interlanguage has its own peculiar character. Overgeneration of passivized ergative constructions poses a learnability problem: with no available negative evidence, the tendency to overpassivize can not be reduced. Two learnability theories, the subset principle and the uniqueness principle, offer insight and a partial solution: for a subclass of ergative verbs, the passive can be pre-empted by the ergative construction. However, for more recalcitrant cases, there is no such basis for exemption, hence their susceptibility to fossilization. A 22-item bibliography is included. (Author/MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED335903

Interlanguage Ergative Constructions and Learnability

Virginia Yip
CUHK

1.Introduction

This paper examines a class of interlanguage structures regularly mass-produced by Chinese learners of English. Chinese learners are noted to overextend passivization to a class of verbs known as 'ergatives.' Previous studies have shown that the English ergative verbs pose an acquisition problem in second language acquisition for learners of various mother tongues (Kellerman 1978, Zobl 1989). Even very advanced learners have difficulty acquiring the ergative construction, and consistently passivize this class of verbs. A comparative study of the ergative construction in Chinese and English shows that they share similar properties; however, this does not seem to facilitate the acquisition of the target English construction, contrary to the prediction of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Fries 1945, Lado 1957). Furthermore, the passivized ergatives are not attributable to exemplification in either the L1 or L2: this distinct type of interlanguage (IL) structure provides a clear example of how IL takes on a life of its own, as it were.

We proceed to discuss the ensuing questions of learnability. The overgeneration of passivized ergative constructions poses a learnability problem: in the absence of negative evidence, there seems to be no straightforward way to reduce the scope of passivization. To illuminate the problem, we shall make use of insights provided by two learnability theories: the Subset Principle (Berwick and Weinberg 1984) and the Uniqueness Principle (Pinker 1984). A partial solution is outlined, involving preemption in accordance with the Uniqueness Principle: for a subclass of ergative verbs, the passive can be preempted by the ergative construction. For the more recalcitrant cases, there is no such basis for preemption, hence, we hypothesize, their subsceptibility to fossilization.

FL019376

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Yip
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

2. Chinglish Data

A certain group of English verbs are consistently mis-passivized in Chinese speakers' IL, (which will be referred to as 'Chinglish'[1]). A few examples from learners' essays are given below:

(1) This kind of diglossic situation can only be appeared in society where the two different variations of language should not be too different and too similar. (advanced)

(2) I do not think that such abusive action should be happened to a twelve-year old child. (advanced)

(3) Rush hour traffic can be vanished because working at home is a new version. (intermediate)

(4) For last 15 years computers have drastically affected our life and this will be continued in the future. (intermediate)

Further examples from written compositions are cited in the Appendix.

The verbs which are passivized incorrectly in Chinglish belong to a particular class with its own special properties. Below we shall examine these properties in detail, with particular reference to the roles of syntax and semantics.

3. Ergative Constructions in English and Chinese

To address the learning difficulty and the learnability problem, we need to conduct an in-depth analysis of both the target and the L1 structures. Below we present an analysis of the ergative construction in English and Chinese.

3.1 English Ergative Verbs

Perlmutter (1978) first discussed a class of 'change-of-state' verbs, which he called 'unaccusative.' Syntactically, they resemble active intransitive verbs in that they subcategorize for a single argument and that argument generally appears on

the surface as the subject. Semantically, these verbs describe processes that lack volitional control. Perlmutter proposed the 'unaccusative hypothesis' that recognizes a distinction between simple intransitive verbs which imply volitional control and those that do not. Some examples of each are given below:

simple intransitive	unaccusative/ergative
(5) We walk.	(7) The leaves fell.
(6) They sleep.	(8) The lake froze.

In the generative literature, Burzio (1981) and Keyser and Roeper (1984) have referred to the class of verbs in (7)-(8) as 'ergative' verbs. They are analyzed as subcategorizing for a single argument which bears the theme theta-role but no external argument (logical subject). Burzio's characterization of the ergatives is as follows:

> Ergative verbs refer to <u>all</u> verbs that appear in D-structure with a direct object, and with a non-thematic subject [i.e., without a subject theta-role]. (1981:45)

In principle, the subcategorized object of an ergative verb has the option of staying in the object position or moving to the subject position. This is visible on the surface in Italian:

(9) Arriva Giovanni.
arrives John

In English the object may only remain in-situ when the subject position is occupied by <u>there</u>:[2]

(10)a. There appeared a man.
b. A man appeared.

One important formal property of an ergative verb, Burzio claims, is that the base-generated object does not receive Case. Thus, movement of the object NP to the subject position is a legal option: it goes from a theta-marked but Caseless position to a non-theta-marked but Case-marked position; the Theta-Criterion is obeyed and the chain is assigned exactly one Case.

Note that the verb itself does not undergo any morphological change.

The class of ergatives can be subdivided into two groups, with different properties and hence consequences for learnability. One subclass of ergatives does not have a transitive/causative counterpart, the other does:

(I) ergatives without a transitive/causative counterpart:

(11)a. Something happened.
b. *They happened something.

(12)a. The guests arrived.
b. *The chauffeurs arrived the guests.

(13)a. The leaves fell.
b. *The wind fell the leaves.

Other examples include appear, arise, disappear, emerge and erupt, etc.

(II) ergatives with a transitive/causative counterpart:

(14)a. The ice melted.
b. The sun melted the ice.

(15)a. The ship sank.
b. The enemies sank the ship.

Other verbs that belong to this category include bounce, boil, break, close, dry, fracture, hang, move, open and roll.

Keyser & Roeper argue that ergatives are underlyingly transitive, i.e., the surface subject of ergatives originates as a deep structure object. The movement takes place in the lexicon, hence an ergative verb such as sink is assigned the following subcategorization frame:

sink: $[_S\ NP_i\ [_{VP}\ __\ t_i]]$

There is convincing evidence that 'all seemingly intransitive verbs are not created equal' (Baker 1983:1). One difference between simple intransitives and ergatives shows up in auxiliary selection for tense/aspect marking in Italian (v. Burzio 1981). The former select avere 'have' while the latter select essere 'be':

(16) Ha cantato Pavarotti.
Has sung Pavarotti
'Pavarotti has sung.'

(17) E uscito Pavarotti.
Is gone out Pavarotti
'Pavarotti has gone out.'

Interestingly, in view of the interlanguage passivization of ergatives, the auxiliary essere is also selected by the passive and the reflexive si construction, which has a passive interpretation. Indeed, in English too, there are similarities between ergatives and agentless passives and ergatives: i) on the surface both are intransitive, ii) both lack a logical subject and iii) the logical object appears in subject position. However, the two exhibit different syntactic behavior. The agentless passive is said to have an invisible 'implicit argument.' The optional by-phrase provides a syntactic diagnostic for its presence: the passive allows the by-phrase whereas the ergative does not (cf. 18b and 19b). Moreover, the implicit argument has the capacity to function as a syntactic controller: the passive allows control into the purpose clause whereas the ergative does not (cf. 18c and 19c).

passive

(18)a. The ship was sunk.
b. The ship was sunk by the enemy.
c. The ship was sunk to collect insurance.

ergative

(19)a. The ship sank.
b. *The ship sank by the enemy.
c. *The ship sank to collect insurance.

As Jaeggli (1986) argues, the passive morpheme absorbs the external theta-role (logical subject) and is crucial in the passive construction. When the by-phrase is present, the external theta-role is transmitted to it; when it is absent as in an agentless passive, the external theta-role is still present in the sense that it is absorbed by the passive morpheme: this explains why the passive allows control into the purpose clause, since there is an implicit argument in the passive which is absent in the ergative structure.

As the acquisition data show, learners seem to treat ergatives like passives. We shall argue that this tendency stems from the inherent similarities between the two structures: in both types of structure, an underlying object appears as surface subject. This similarity can be stated in both syntactic and semantic terms. Syntactically, the surface subject in both cases is the deep structure object; semantically, it bears the role of patient or theme (Jackendoff 1972). One question for the analysis of the interlanguage phenomenon, then, concerns the relative roles of the syntactic and semantic properties of ergative verbs.

3.2 Chinese Ergative Verbs

Chinese too have a class of verbs with properties similar to the English ergatives verbs. Li (1985) has analyzed Chinese verbs denoting presence, appearance and disappearance as ergatives. They include the following (p. 248):

a. Presence: you 'have,' zhan 'stand,' zuo 'sit,'
tang 'lie,' gua 'hang,' fang 'place,' etc.

b. Appearance: lai 'come,' chu 'come out,' qi 'emerge,'
xia 'fall,' jin 'enter,' dao 'arrive,'etc.

c. Disappearance: qu 'go,' si 'die,' pao 'run,'
tao 'escape,' guo 'pass,' etc.

Notice that as in Italian, the underlying object can appear in its deep structure position:

(20)a. Jintian lai le yige ren.
today come ASP oneCL man
'Today (there) came a man.'

b. Zhangsan lai le.
Zhangsan come ASP
'Zhangsan has come.'

Moreover, Chinese has those ergative verbs which have a transive/causative counterpart, parallel to the English ones in (14) - (15):

(21)a. Taiyang ronghua le xue.
sun melt ASP snow
'The sun melted the snow.'

(21)b. Xue ronghua le.
snow melt ASP
'The snow melted.'

Li claims that these Chinese verbs are like the English ergatives in that they do not assign subject theta-roles while unlike the English counterparts, they do assign accusative Case to the subcategorized object (v. Li 1985 for detailed arguments). The Chinese ergative verbs also have the option of staying in object position or moving to the subject position. The kind of movement involved is A-movement, i.e., movement from an argument position to another argument position. What is important for our purposes here is that the type of A-movement from object to subject position has instantiations in learners' L1.

The comparative study of the ergatives in English and Chinese shows that they involve similar processes, viz. A-movement from the object to the subject position. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis which predicts that if the L1 and L2 do not differ much with respect to a particular structure, learning should be facilitated, we would expect the target ergatives to present little problem since the native language also has similar structures derived by similar processes. On the contrary, as we shall see, the English ergatives seem to present persistent learning problems, even for advanced learners. Before turning to learnability considerations, however, we

need to examine the rationale for the IL structures more closely.

4. Interlanguage Ergatives

The passivized ergatives belong to the most challenging class of IL constructions: those which have no obvious source in either L1 or L2. Crucially, neither English nor Chinese allows the passivization of those ergatives without a transitive counterpart--the kind of structure found in the IL:

(22) *What was happened yesterday?

(23) *The leaves were fallen down.

(24) Sheme (*bei) fashen le?
What PASS happen ASP
*'What was happened?'

(25) Shuyeh (*bei) diaoxialai le.
leaf PASS fall down ASP
*'The leaves were fallen down.'

With respect to those ergatives with a transitive counterpart, while they undergo passivization productively in English, only a subset of these allow passivization in Chinese (see the general restrictive nature of passive in Chinese discussed in Li and Thompson 1976).

Note that the phenomenon is not specific to Chinglish. Zobl (1989) has noted the tendency of learners of various L1 backgrounds to subsume ergative verbs under the passive:

(26) The most memorable experience of my life <u>was happened</u> 15 years ago. (Arabic L1; advanced)

(27) Most people <u>are fallen</u> in love and marry with somebody. (Japanese L1; high intermediate)

(28) My mother <u>was died</u> when I was just a baby (Thai L1; high intermediate)

The fact that learners over-passivize reveals that they somehow interpret ergatives as underlyingly transitive (since only transitive verbs allow passivization in English).[3] The following are some oft-cited errors from the L1 literature illustrating the transitive/causative use of 'ergative' verbs: (cited in Bowerman 1983)

(29) C 4;2 He disappeared himself.
(30) J 6+ Do you want to see us disappear our heads? (Then, with a friend, she ducks down behind the couch.)
(31) E 3;0 Don't giggle me. (As father tickles her.)

L2 adult learners, like children, often turn ergative verbs into transitives/causatives. Some examples are cited in Rutherford (1987:89):

(32) The shortage of fuels occurred the need for economical engine.

(33) This construction will progress my country.

(34) Careless currency devaluation will go back us to old habits.

The transitive use of these ergative verbs in the IL shows that they subcategorize for an object, and hence can be freely passivized. Certain other ergative verbs, however, do not seem to be used transitively: these include happen and suffer. Moreover, suffer occurs in Chinglish with an object while remaining passive:

(35) She has been suffered the pain of tangled legs [i.e., bound feet].

This structure is exactly parallel to the Latin:

(36) Passus est dolorem.
SufferPERF-PASS pain-ACC
'He suffered pain.'

Such verbs in Latin are inherently passive, yet can take an object.[4] It seems that some verbs in Chinglish, like the corresponding class of verbs in

Latin and the English be born, are treated as inherently passive, i.e., listed in the lexicon as such rather than transformationally derived.

The question of lexical listing raises the general question of how the learner picks out individual verbs as members of the ergative class. As we noted earlier, the class can be identified by syntactic or semantic criteria. Ergative verbs in general, and specifically those which undergo passivization in Chinglish, belong to a narrow semantic class. We have found only the following verbs incorrectly passivized in our corpus:

Intransitive only: happen, die, suffer, occur, appear, vanish

Also transitive: change, grow, continue, increase/decrease, improve, derive, break

The single arguments of the first group of verbs are prototypical examples of the semantic role of **patient**: they denote affected entities with no control over the event. The fact that over-passivization only applies to this restricted class of predicates but not to other intransitive verbs might be taken as an argument for the semantic account of the phenomenon. The alternative, that syntactic properties of these verbs are responsible, begs the question of what evidence might identify them to the learner as a distinct class. The diagnostic properties invoked by syntacticians are **negative** in nature, e.g., the subjects of ergative verbs cannot control into a purpose clause (cf. 19c), and cannot form prepositional passives:

(37) This house was lived in by Mozart.
(38) *This house was died in by Mozart.

Yet all approaches to learnability assume that non-occurrence is at best a very weak clue to ungrammaticality. An analogous problem faces syntactic accounts of how children might learn which verbs can undergo Dative Shift (Pinker 1989).

5. Why are Ergative Constructions So Hard to Acquire?

It is no accident that ergatives present acquisition problems to most learners of English. In fact, learners' treatment of ergatives as if they were passives can be seen as a consequence of the typological organization of English, in which grammatical relations are based on the nominative-accusative system. The canonical mapping between theta-roles and grammatical relations in English is agent-subject, theme-object (v. Marantz 1984). The mapping of the agent theta-role to the subject of a transitive verb is the most preferred and productive mapping in English. Ergative verbs in English represent an exception to this mapping; Chinglish actually generalizes it at the expense of this exception, making English even more 'nominative-accusative' than it really is. Fillmore (1968) pointed out that when a theme surfaces in subject position, which is a 'non-normal' subject choice, as happens with the passive, the verb has special morphological marking to indicate the change in grammatical relations. Chinglish, by passivizing ergative verbs, is simply following this generalization to the letter.

Despite the many similarities that ergatives share with passives, they differ in one crucial respect: ergatives have no special morphological marking, but appear just like other simple intransitive verbs, which may well be a cross-linguistically marked phenomenon.[5] Since passive is very productive in English, it is plausible for learners to adopt the working hypothesis: whenever the object is in subject position, mark the verb with passive morphology. However, the class of ergative verbs constitutes an exception to the rule. These verbs do not require any special marking to indicate the change in grammatical relation whereby the theme argument is not in its canonical position. To master these verbs, the learner has to learn <u>not</u> to mark them. The fact that ergative verbs are not marked morphologically runs counter to the assumption of canonical mapping.

6. The Learnability Problem

The overgeneralization of passive to ergative verbs poses a challenging learnability problem. The problem is how might learners come to know the error of their ways without the benefit of negative evidence.[6] Two learnability principles, the Subset Principle (Berwick and Weinberg 1984) and the Uniqueness Principle (Pinker 1984), which are developed in the context of L1 acquisition are invoked below to shed light on the Chinglish phenomenon.[7]

The Subset Principle has the effect of constraining the ordering of learners' hypotheses such that they are protected from arriving at grammars from which they could only retreat via negative evidence. Since learning must proceed from positive evidence only, learners must start off with the narrowest possible hypothesis compatible with the available data. In case the hypothesis is too narrow (hence a subset), positive evidence in the input will suffice to inform the learner, who could then move on to a more general hypothesis (a superset). The problem arises when the learner starts with an overly general hypothesis. Recovery from this situation is predicted to be impossible in the absence of negative data since no positive evidence from the input would contradict the hypothesis.

The other major approach to learnability is associated with the notion of preemption based on the operation of the Uniqueness Principle. According to the Uniqueness Principle, deviant forms arising via productive mechanisms are preempted when an alternative realization of these forms in the input enters into competition and wins out; it is assumed that the learner resists having more than one entry for a semantic notion (e.g., in an inflectional paradigm). Preemption is invoked as a potential solution to the problems of overgeneration. The Subset and Uniqueness Principles are shown to be complementary in that the problems predicted by the former to be impossible can be overcome by preemption, for which the latter provides a possible mechanism.

Recall that ergative verbs can be divided into two subgroups: type I, those that do not have a transitive counterpart and type II, those that do. The overgeneralization of passive to the first subgroup, at least, creates a situation involving a subset-superset relation. The IL grammar generates a superset which includes both grammatical passives and ill-formed passives such as <u>be happened</u>, <u>be fallen</u> and <u>be died</u>. Thus the following subset-superset relation is obtained:

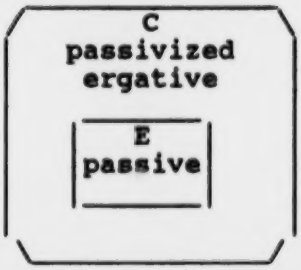

Figure 1. Passives and Ergatives (I)

C is the superset Chinglish grammar containing the incorrect passivized ergative verbs, which have to be preempted; E is the subset containing the correct forms in the target language.[8]

The learnability question that arises is: how do learners cut back from the superset to a restricted subset which is semantically and syntactically well-motivated? Put differently, how do the malformed passives drop out of the IL grammar? There is no positive evidence in the English input for the non-occurrence of these forms: they simply do not occur in the input. The learner would have to register the non-occurrence of such forms, which constitutes a very weak form of indirect negative evidence (cf. Pinker 1989). Hearing positive evidence exemplifying the ergative construction containing these verbs cannot reliably lead the learner to the conclusion that they do not undergo passive.

6.1 Expunging Passivised Ergatives

The problem of here is analogous to the situation involving the overgeneralization of dative movement to illegal verbs (cf. Pinker 1989). For the incorrect passivized forms to drop out from the grammar, the learner would have to notice the non-occurrence of these forms and induce their ungrammaticality. One potential solution to the learnability dilemma without resort to negative evidence is one that hinges on the operation of the Uniqueness Principle. The Uniqueness Principle has the function of mapping one form onto one meaning: when the grammar recognizes only one meaning, it is not assumed to map onto more than one form. For example, the learner who produces What was happened? also hears What has happened? in the input. Some learners, in fact, seem to use both forms interchangeably (39) or to waver between them (40):

(39) The world war III will be happened in the future. If we have SDI program, it will not only protect us but also save our lives even if the world war III happened. (advanced)

(40) From last year until now, politics have been changed rapidly.

Such learners clearly allow two forms to coexist, perhaps in competition. It may take some time for the learner to decide between them (in the case of happen) or to distinguish the transitive and ergative readings of change. For preemption to occur, first, the two forms have to be interpreted as encoding the same meaning; then the Uniqueness Principle may operate to question the assumption that both are possible alternatives, leading the learner to choose between the two forms. The version exemplified in the input will have to exert priority over the incorrect form, resulting in its preemption.[9,10]

This situation is predicted by the Subset Principle alone to be difficult in the absence of negative evidence. However, in conjunction with the Uniqueness Principle, the learnability problem can in principle be overcome. Here we have a case exemplifying

how these two learnability principles can efficiently complement each other in illuminating L2 phenomena.

6.2 Acquisition of Ergatives With Transitive Counterpart

This second subgroup of ergatives pose a different problem: their transitive counterpart will always allow passivization. Here are some more examples of ergative verbs with a transitive counterpart:

(41)a. The window broke.
b. The window was broken.

(42)a. What cooks most quickly?
b. What can be cooked most quickly?

In this case, the difficulty lies in recognizing the distinction between the passive and the ergative construction. Learners do not seem to make a distinction between the passivized transitive verb and the ergative verb but collapse the two. Here the question is not that the learner has to expunge certain deviant forms from the grammar; what needs to be learned is the distinction between the passive and the ergative constructions.

According to the Uniqueness Principle which states that each function gets a distinct encoding, only when the learner perceives a difference in function will he mark a form distinctively. Given the subtle semantic distinctions between the two as discussed earlier, what might motivate learners to isolate the class of ergatives and encode them in a different way from the passive? The logical requirement of a causal agent seems to favor overwhelmingly the passive representation. Insofar as the two structures share the function of putting a theme argument in subject position, Uniqueness impedes the acquisition of the ergative version. As long as the learner does not differentiate functionally between the two, there is no motivation for mapping the semantics of ergatives onto a separate form.

One solution might involve the first class of ergatives, those without transitive counterparts, e.g.,

happen. We argued above that preemption can operate in relatively straightforward fashion to replace the passivized forms by the target ergatives. Once this has occurred, one class of ergatives has been admitted into the grammar, paving the way for further verbs to join it. The ergative versions of the second class of verbs, e.g., break could then enter the grammar on the basis of the first class. This, of course, makes predictions about developmental stages: learners should begin using the first class correctly before they acquire the second class, or alternatively, the two might be acquired simultaneously. Thus, certain learners might be found to have acquired the first class but not the second. We are not aware of any evidence bearing on this prediction, and it certainly awaits further investigation.

Whether or not the first class of verbs does play such a key role, the learnability situation appears more favorable when formulated in subset terms:

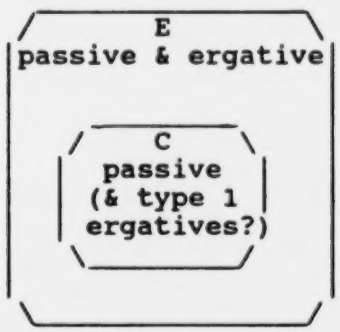

Figure 2. Passives and Ergatives (II)

C is the Chinglish grammar generating passives but few or no ergatives; E is the English grammar generating both passives and ergatives. Since C is the subset, acquisition can proceed in the absence of negative evidence. The learner only has to hear the ergatives in the input, assign the correct analysis and incorporate them into the grammar. However, learners typically undergenerate ergatives and seem reluctant to expand their linguistic repertoire to include them. The key to understanding this dilemma lies in the

insight provided by the Uniqueness Principle as discussed above. Again, the two principles of learnability theory work together to illuminate the problems involved.

One goal of learnability theory is to account for which phenomena are susceptible to fossilization. One way of characterizing fossilization is that preemption fails to happen. Some L2 learners are bound to continue producing these fossilized errors despite the availability of the relevant input. Such failure of preemption is quite as interesting as its successful operation. While the input is the major determinant of success or failure of preemption, it is by no means the only one: here learner-related variables become significant. A logical prerequisite for preemption to occur is that the learner register a difference in form between the target structure and the one created by IL productive mechanisms. Thus a learner has to pay attention to form and if two forms are noted to encode the same meaning, the Uniqueness Principle will operate accordingly. From our discussion of the phenomena in question, it can be seen that both principles play a role in making learnability predictions: their interaction yields a fuller picture of the learnability situation. For example, in the acquisition of two types of ergative verbs, the predictions of Subset Principle alone would still leave us with an incomplete understanding of the situation. With the insight of the Uniqueness Principle, we see something more:

(i) Regarding the first type of ergative verbs (without a transitive counterpart), the Subset Principle alone predicts the situation to be difficult without negative evidence; the Uniqueness Principle provides a solution whereby the incorrect passivized version can be preempted by the correct ergative version.

(ii) Regarding the second type of ergative verbs (with a transitive counterpart), the Subset Principle predicts acquisition to be easier as positive evidence motivates the widening of the subset to include the ergatives. However, the apparent delay in acquisition may be accounted for by the Uniqueness Principle: the

ergative version and the passive version of their transitive counterparts are collapsed as one undifferentiated meaning, which is mapped onto a single form, viz., the passive. Thus acquisition of these ergative verbs is not as straightforward as the Subset Principle alone predicts. Insofar as the functions of ergative and passive are perceived to be the same, the Uniqueness Principle predicts acquisition of these verbs to be difficult.

7. Conclusion

We have brought current theoretical analyses of ergatives in English and Chinese to bear on the over-passivization of ergatives in Chinglish. The English ergative seems to be a cross-linguistically marked construction in that there is no special morphology to mark it. Learners prefer to mark the verb overtly to indicate the change in grammatical relation--the theme occurring in the subject position. This class of interlanguage constructions reflects a universal tendency which does not derive directly from either L1 or L2. Interlanguage grammar often 'creates' structures that seem natural or follow universal tendencies, and the Chinglish treatment of ergatives provides a case in point. However, the passivization of ergatives is well-motivated in that it brings them into line with the canonical mapping in English, viz. the semantic role of theme to the object position, with deviations from this being overtly marked. The error thus involves a complex interaction of syntax and semantics.

We have also examined the overgeneration of passivized ergatives in Chinglish in terms of our two learnability principles. Ergatives fall into two classes: those without a transitive counterpart and those with a transitive counterpart. The problem with over-passivizing the first type is that these ungrammatical passives have to drop out of the interlanguage grammar. According to the Uniqueness Principle, when the learner hears the correct ergative version in the input, he will have to choose between the interlanguage form and that exemplified in the input, since one form is assumed to map onto one

meaning. Preemption of the erroneous passivized ergatives can thus occur.

The other type of ergatives are those whose transitive counterpart can indeed be passivized provided the agent is intended. The problem is that the ergative version is difficult to acquire since every time the learner uses such a verb, with the theme argument in the subject position, the verb automatically receives passive morphology. The learner prefers to collapse what the target language treats as two categories into a single category--a tendency predicted by Uniqueness. The semantic distinctions between the ergative and transitive versions appear to be too subtle for the L2 learner whose semantic space has been partitioned by the categories of his L1. Thus the learnability situation, as well as the phenomenon itself, involves the interaction of syntactic and semantic factors.

Notes

1. The English interlanguage produced by Chinese learners of English is termed 'Chinglish,' which is intended to be a neutral, descriptive term, capturing properties arising from the interaction of two linguistic systems, viz., L1 Chinese and L2 English.

2. We assume, following the generative literature, that the post-verbal position in the existential construction is the object position.

3. Learners' subsuming ergatives under passives could be taken as further empirical evidence in support of the generative type of analysis, viz. the NP-argument of ergatives originates as the underlying object.

4. This observation is due to Stephen Matthews. Note that passive constructions can also take an object in Chinese, e.g., ta bei qiang le qian 'he was robbed (of) money.' This could be a contributing factor in the Chinglish phenomenon, although the structure corresponding to (35) is impossible in Chinese because the happen type of ergative verb cannot be passivized.

5. Languages use various devices, such as reflexive morphemes in Romance and vowel alternations in Germanic, to encode the transitive and ergative verbs differently, e.g.,

French:	se briser (erg.)	'break'--reflexive
	briser (transitive)	
German:	sinken (erg.)	'sink'--vowel alternation
	senken (transitive)	

English preserves only relics of such an alternation as in fall/fell, drink/drench and sing/sinch (I am indebted to Bill Rutherford for this learned example). It is doubtful whether these pairs are synchronically related.

6. The role of negative evidence in adult L2 acquisition is a controversial issue. The critical question remains: is negative evidence necessary or useful in motivating reanalysis of structures? (v. Schwartz 1987 and White 1988 for different views). For our purposes, we will assume that even without negative evidence, learners are able to recover from over-generation.

7. Yip (1989) argues that the goals of learnability theory in L1 and L2 are partially distinct and suggests that the same principles developed in the L1 context be adapted to offer insights into the learnability problems given rise by transfer and creative construction in L2.

8. The diagram simplifies the situation for ease of exposition. Chinglish will continue to undergenerate passive constructions of certain types, including the following:

i. 'get' passives, e.g., He got beaten up.
ii. stative predicates, e.g., The company is owned by a crook.
iii. complex predicates, e.g., He is thought to be cheating.
iv. nominalizations, e.g., The review of her book by Chomsky

9. In first language acquisition, input data are assumed to take priority because of the provisional status of forms produced by productive mechanisms (cf. Pinker 1984). As long as the IL remains permeable, i.e., short of fossilization, similar considerations apply in L2 acquisition. However, as the IL becomes fossilized, these forms may lose their provisional status and become impervious to preemption.

10. There is nothing that would force the learner to assume that happen has only one subcategorization entry, i.e., realized as an ergative verb. In fact, one student informed us that he thought happen could be passivized, i.e., it is transitive as well. As long as the learner 'creates' a separate meaning, e.g., 'cause to happen' corresponding to be happened, Uniqueness would predict the transitive/causative version to persist. Thus no obvious factor seems available that would dictate the learner's expectation of a unique entry for the happen type of ergative verbs.

References

Baker, M. 1983. Objects, themes and lexical rules in Italian. In L. Levin, M. Rappaport and A. Zaenen (eds.) Papers in lexical-functional grammar Bloomington: Indiana University Linguistics Club.

Berwick, R. and A. Weinberg. 1984. The Grammatical Basis of Linguistic Performance Cambridge, MA:MIT Press.

Bowerman, M. 1983. How do children avoid constructing an overly general grammar in the absence of feedback about what is not a sentence? Papers and Reports on Child Language Development Stanford University. 22.

Burzio, L. 1981. Intransitive verbs and Italian auxiliaries. PhD dissertation, MIT.

Fillmore, C. 1968. The case for case. In E. Bach and R. Harms (eds.) Universals in Linguistic Theory New York: Holt, Rinehart and & Winston.

Fries, C. 1945. Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Jaeggli, O. 1986. Passive. Linguistic Inquiry 15:381-416

Jackendoff, R. 1972. Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar Cambridge, MA:MIT Press.

Kellerman, E. 1978. Giving learners a break: native language intuitions as a source of predictions about transferability. Working Papers on Bilingualism 15:60-92

Keyser, J. and T. Roeper. 1984. On the middle and ergative constructions in English. Linguistic Inquiry 15. 3.

Lado, R. 1957. Linguistics Across Cultures Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Li, A. 1985. Abstract case in Chinese. PhD dissertation, University of Southern California.

Li, C. and S. Thompson. 1976. Subject and topic: a new typology of language. In C. Li (ed.) Subject and Topic. New York: Academic Press.

Marantz, A. 1984. On the Nature of Grammatical Relations Cambridge, MA:MIT Press.

Perlmutter, D. 1978. Impersonal passives and the unaccusative hypothesis. Proceedings of the 4th Annual Meeting, Berkeley Linguistics Society, 157-89.

Pinker, S. 1984. Language Learnability and Language Development Harvard University Press.

_____. 1989. Learnability and Cognition: the Acquisition of Argument Structure Cambridge, MA:MIT Press.

Rutherford, W. 1987. Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching Longman: London.

Schwartz, B. 1987. The epistemological status of second language acquisition. PhD dissertation, University of Southern California.

White, L. 1988. Implications of learnability theories for second language learning and teaching. Paper presented at TESOL 1988 conference, Chicago.

Yip, V. 1989. Aspects of Chinese/English interlanguage: syntax, semantics and learnability. PhD dissertation, University of Southern California.

Zobl, H. 1989. Canonical typological structures and ergativity in English L2 acquisition. In Gass, S. and J. Schachter (eds.) Linguistic Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition Cambridge University Press.

Appendix Examples of Passivized Ergatives

Subjects: students are from Taiwan and examples drawn from written compositions or oral reports. Subjects are aged 18-30, mostly in their mid-twenties.

201 = High intermediate ESL for science & technology
202 S & T = Advanced ESL for science & technology
262 = Argumentation course for business students (post-202)

I do not think that such abusive action should be happened to a twelve-year old child. (SH, 262)

Rush-hour traffic can be vanished because working at home is a new version. (BFW, 202 S & T)

Our life style will be greatly changed in the recent future when computers are combined intelligently with other scientific techniques. (BFW, 202 S & T)

Our offspring will be suffered because we neglect the environment pollution. (BFW, 202 S & T)

She has been suffered the pain of tangled legs... and pleased her new marriage. (BFW, 202 S & T)

People are suffered by the death.(BFW, 202 S & T)

The electrical energy and convey electricity will be sharply changed in the future. (CCC, 202 S & T)

The World War III will be happened in the future. If we have SDI program, it will not only protect us but also save our lives even if the World War III happened. (PH, 202 S & T)

It means we do not have any chance to test this X-ray laser until a war is happened. (AH, 202 S & T)

For last 15 years computers have drastically affected our life and this will be continued in the future. (AH, 202 S & T)

Immigration and the other difficult problems will be appeared. (YH, 202)

From last year till now, the politics and economy have been changed rapidly. (PSH, 202)

Things have changed, but the crux is that what people in Taiwan think about is changed. (YWC, 202)

Overcrowding and crimes are derived from same source. The population of LA was rapidly grown these years. (AW, 202 S & T)

Not all of the cars run out in the same time, the condition of traffic will be improved. (JJ, 202 S & T)